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ABSTRACT

The term "community literacy" is normally used to denote a wide variety of off-campus, non-university, and even non-school educational settings, from adult education to family literacy to after-school children's reading circles in places like community centers and public libraries. One college educator uses his connection to a university to try to serve the community literacy efforts in his area. Off campus, he has taught in local programs, researched community literacy, used his organizational skills and helped in procuring both public and private funding for literacy programs. In Ohio, as nationally, approximately half of all adults perform below average by some measures of literacy, and half of all single mothers drop out of high school--with 75% of those women living in poverty. Existing programs can be researched and contacts made via electronic mail on the world wide web. The call for a "new model for social action" refers to a very specific kind of social action by university faculty, well suited to contribute to community literacy because of their training and access to university resources. In a recent article, Ellen Cushman states that very real benefits are also received by those university faculty participants from that community. (Contains five references; a list of WWW sites is appended.) (CR)

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"WORK TO BE DONE": COMMUNITY LITERACY AS A NEW MODEL OF SOCIAL ACTION FOR LITERACY EDUCATORS

A paper delivered at the annual meeting of the
Conference on College Composition and Communication
Phoenix, AZ, March 13, 1997

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I'd like to tell you how I became involved in community literacy in the first place, how I was able to use a connection to a university (even as a graduate student) to try to benefit the community literacy agency I worked with, and how I continue to try to use a university position (this time as an assistant professor) to serve community literacy efforts in my area. I'd like to indicate how others might operate from a college base to become socially active as literacy teachers and researchers in the communities where they live. Along the way, I won't be able to avoid offering a few strong opinions about what I consider right and wrong ways of using a base on a university campus to become involved in community literacy.

The term "community literacy" is normally used to denote a wide variety of off-campus, non-university, and even non-school educational settings, from adult education to family literacy to after-school reading children's reading circles in places like community centers and public libraries. Community literacy education might include ESL, GED, and citizenship classes, job skills seminars, and (recently) computer skills workshops. Community literacy is by definition a "liberatory" pedagogy in

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the sense that it serves underrepresented populations (ethnic minorities, the poor, and especially women). Community literacy is also "liberatory" in the sense that it educates these populations in literacies explicitly aimed at empowering them to understand and have some degree of control over the worlds they live in. Peck, Flower and Higgins define community literacy in terms of its embrace of the goals of critical inquiry into the status quo, the development of specific strategic approaches to social problems, and progressive social change (205-06).

When I read last year's 4Cs Call for Papers, I really took to heart the language that urged us to focus on the "work to be done" in literacy teaching. As a university type who is also a literacy educator in programs unrelated to the university, I interpreted the term "literacy teaching" in a very comprehensive way, assuming that our social obligations as literacy educators extend far beyond the university itself, to a population that may never have the chance to take advantage of the vast resources of the university, but whose needs are nonetheless urgent. Specifically, the Call for Papers challenges us to identify "new models of . . . social action." My involvement with community literacy has offered me "new model of social action" that enables to me to work not only for the the individual transformation we like to see in each of our students, but also for broader social change.

I have found that I can be useful in community literacy not only as an individual teacher, but also as a conduit for channeling the resources of the university to community literacy programs. On my campus, I have tried to educate my students and colleagues about community literacy issues through coursework and appearances at forums on educational issues. (For example, a graduate class I have planned for next year is on

"literacy and orality," and it will address, among other topics, the politics and economics of literacy.) Off campus, and I hope more importantly, I have tried to support community literacy efforts in more direct ways: 1) with my own teaching in local programs; 2) with research into community literacy (such as a 2-year ethnography I wrote of a family literacy program in Tucson, Arizona); 3) with organizational skills; and 4) with help in procuring funding both public and private.

I was introduced to community literacy through pure good luck. The University of Arizona, where I was finishing a Ph.D., offered graduate coursework in the form of a "community literacy internship." That course was pioneered by Thomas Miller and Sandra Florence and is now taught by Sandy together with John Warnock. Through it, I became a volunteer with Pima County Adult Education in Tucson, and I made the acquaintance of the amazing director of the program, Greg Hart. As a volunteer, I was a kind of teacher's aide, sometimes team-teaching, sometimes helping develop course materials, sometimes filling in a substitute, and after a few months I became qualified by the state to be a paid substitute teacher. In the mean time, Greg Hart and I were discussing research projects I might do to provide useful data to the program. We settled on an ethnography of a family literacy program that was under the umbrella of of Pima CountyAdult Education, and for the next two-and-a-half years I lived and breathed community literacy, spending much more time at the program sites than at my university. The project eventually became my dissertation, and I hope the copy I sent to Greg Hart also did what it was supposed to in the first place: provide a mountain of data that could be mined for nuggets to plug into applications for county, state and federal funding, and for proposals for private grants.

On my new job in a new town, Youngstown, Ohio, I've had to do my own legwork in locating community literacy efforts in my area and finding ways in which I might be useful to them. I'm proceeding very slowly and very carefully. One thing I learned from involvement in community literacy is that many program teachers and administrators are wary of all the so-called "help" we at the university feel we have to offer. Too many of us barge into community literacy, where people have been working for decades, and offer the literacy-theory-of-the-month from our reading. (This was my biggest worry when I wrote in my dissertation a list of tentative recommendations for the program I studied. Even with the generous feedback I got on early drafts from program teachers and administrators, I was afraid of saying ignorant and even potentially harmful things.) Many community literacy programs are exploited as "living laboratories," particularly by university Education Department students who do their observations and then write reports that are turned in for a grade but never shared with program administrators.

And we might do even more harm. At an 1994 MLA session where I participated as a panelist, one audience member proposed that university types become involved in community literacy in order to funnel grant funding from the programs to the university--the opposite direction of the flow of resources that I'm advocating here. (Clearly this person knew nothing about the huge wealth of the university relative to the poverty in which most community literacy programs operate.)

To avoid making blunders out of ignorance, then, and to avoid alienating the very programs I'd like to help, I have spent the past six months doing nothing but research on existing programs in my area, their philosophies, their goals, their funding. I started on the World Wide Web;

see the handout, where there are several national Websites that helped me get on nationwide mailing lists (including some Canadian ones). I started e-mailing names I found there, and now I'm connected to agencies in my local area as well. In particular, the Ohio Literacy Resource Center is just an hour away from where I teach, at Kent State University. From those good people I have received a huge amount of data on the state of adult literacy in Ohio, which, as it probably is in most places, is pretty depressing. Something like half of all Ohio adults perform "below average" by some measures of literacy, and among those at the lowest levels are larger numbers of blacks than whites, larger numbers of unemployed than employed, larger numbers of people below the federal poverty line than above it (Jenkins and Kirsch). In Ohio as nationally, the situation is worse for women than for men, with half of all single mothers dropping out of high school, and with 75% of single mothers without high school diplomas living in poverty ("The Economics of Literacy").

From the OLRC I have also learned what family literacy programs are already in operation in the state and in my area, where potential need exists, which other literacy agencies might be interested in cooperating with the establishment of a family literacy program in Youngstown, and so on. I even got a calendar of community literacy-related events in the state, from grant workshops to agency "fairs" where you can schmooze and make connections. I'll be attending a statewide conference on family literacy in the fall. On my own, or rather through the grants office at my university, I've identified a potential major grant agency, the Youngstown Foundation, which is devoted to funding minority programs. After this past six months of information-gathering, I'm nearly at the point of making the first tentative approaches to potential interested parties,

including my own university, which has promised to support establishment of a service-learning component such as the kind described by Bruce Herzberg in a 1994 3Cs article.

I want to repeat that the "new model of social action" I'm talking about here is not a call for individual, one-to-one acts on the part of concerned citizens, as important as these are. It is a call for a very specific kind of social action, action that we are suited for by our training and by our access to the resources of the university. I admire Ellen Cushman's assertion in a recent 3Cs article that "modern rhetoric and composition scholars can be agents of social change outside the university" (7). The people she works with recognize that part of what she has to offer flows from "the prestige of the language resources and social status" she brings with her from the university (17), and she says that "we must work very hard in the academy with the support of our community in order to garner the status and resources that we then return to the community" (19). One day I wondered aloud to a community literacy administrator whether the research I was doing would be at all useful. He replied that the very idea that the report I was writing would come from a university-sanctioned voice would make it useful. It would help legimitimize claims about the effectiveness of the literacy program I was studying, no matter what foolish or misguided things I might say in it. I was comforted, sort of.

Cushman also makes the very important point that even as we work to use our base on a university campus to contribute what we can to the non-university community, we must be mindful of the very real benefits we receive from the communities we study and teach in. Like the people Cushman came to know, the community literacy teachers and students I have worked with have given me gifts far greater than those I could ever

hope to give them. They have extended their trust, "lent me their status," as Cushman puts it, "legitimized my presence in their neighborhood," made my work possible (17). They have been patient and generous through countless hours of field observation, surveys, and interviews. They have read and corrected errors in field notes, survey and interview analyses, and early versions of articles. One community literacy administrator read an entire draft of my dissertation, and then bought the coffee during a three-hour, page-by-page discussion of it. (This is not to mention the personal relationships I have been blessed to make through shared meals, picnics, parties, babysitting, and shade-tree car repair.) These people have given me my Ph.D., and along with it the professional status I need to get a job in my field. The least I can do is use that position to make the resources of the university community, including myself as a teacher and researcher, available to the non-university community.

I do want to say that I think that some of the help Cushman offers the lower-class ethnic community she works with is help that any literate person with connections to a more prestigious community could have provided: they are individual acts of goodness. She helped people write resumes, job applications and college applications, and she herself wrote recommendations to landlords, to courts, to potential employers, and admissions counselors (13). While we should not dismiss such efforts, one of the other activities Cushman describes come closer to the "new model of social action" we both appear to embrace, in that they show what can be done by a scholar in rhetoric and composition from a university base. For example, together with a teenager from the community where she works, she codirects a small literacy program for children that "united resources from Rensselaer, Russell Sage College, the public library, and two

philanthropic organizations" (13). This is the kind of work we are uniquely situated to do, and is the best use of our particular talents as literacy educators.

I hope I've done some good, or at least more good than harm, in my involvement with community literacy so far, and I hope I find ways to do good work in the future. I was lucky in the way I got started, especially in having mentors such as Sandy Florence, Greg Hart, and many other community literacy activitists. Now I have to learn to adapt myself to new circumstances and try to make myself useful in the community where I live. I remember the personal, one-to-one help I've given to individuals as a teacher and as a friend., and that is surely something we all have to offer. But we have more to offer as members of a high-prestige, relatively wealthy community, which is the university. The "new model for social action" I have in mind is to take advantage of that position by acting as a funnel for resources, a funnel that channels not just our invividual good acts, but also the resources of the university, and the resources of other prestigious communities to which our position at the university gives us access, to communities that badly need the help.

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Jenkins, Lynn and Irwin Kirsch. "Adult Literacy in Ohio: Results of the State Adult Literacy Survey." Educational Testing Service, 1994. (Available from the Ohio Literacy Resource Center.)

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Appendix

Community Literacy Resources: Some Useful Websites

Literacy Volunteers of America (LVA)
<http://archon.educ.kent.edu/LVA/>

The LVA site is a very good place to start, with lots of "hot buttons" to other good sites.

Laubach Literacy Action (LLA)
<http://www.laubach.org/>

Laubach is one of the venerable old literacy advocacy and literacy education groups, operating in every state of the country.

National Center on Adult Literacy (NCAL)
<http://litserver.literacy.upenn.edu/>

This site is fairly new, but is becoming a good clearinghouse for information.

National Institute for Literacy (NIFL)
<http://novel.nifl.gov/>
Literacy AmeriCorps
<http://novel.nifl.gov/americor.htm>

These two sites are maintained by the feds, so take what you find there with a grain of salt, though Clinton has been making good noises about funding literacy efforts, especially through AmeriCorps.

National Adult Literacy Database (NALD)
<http://www.nald.ca/>
Family Literacy Action Group (FLAG)
<http://www.nald.ca/flag.htm>

These excellent sites are from Canada, which has been more progressive than the United States in many ways when it comes to community literacy and family literacy.

Toyota Families for Learning
<http://spike.cs.uno.edu/>

This is a program, like the one I studied in Tucson, affiliated with the National Center for Family Literacy (NCFL) in Louisville, Kentucky, which, oddly enough, appears to have no Website of its own yet.

The Community Literacy Center (CLC)
<http://eng.hss.cmu.edu/clc/>

This site is maintained by Carnegie Mellon as part of its Community Literacy Center, a good example of a university/community joint effort.

Ohio Literacy Resource Center (ORLC)
<http://archon.educ.kent.edu/>

I put this local state site on as an example. Try finding a local site for the community where you live.